

February 27, 2023

To Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Concerning Skilled Nursing Facility Funding for SFY 2024 and SFY 2025

My name is Erin Healy, I am the Administrator for Bethel Health Care Center, located in Bethel Connecticut. Bethel Health Care has been providing nursing home care in our community for 29 years. We are a 161 bed nursing home, and we have 224 employees working at our facility. We are members of the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities (CAHCF). Now three years into the COVID-19 pandemic and public health emergency, and I can say that our nursing home, the residents we serve, and our employees, continue to be challenged like in no other time in our history of providing services in Connecticut. Our facility is determined as ever to return to a state of normalcy for the residents, their families, and our staff.

Ravaging Inflation, Severe Staffing Shortages is Hindering Admissions, Increasing Labor Costs and Slowing the Nursing Home Recovery

In my 20 years in health care, I have never experienced this degree of inflation and the severity of the current staffing crisis. Inflation coupled with employee recruitment and retention remains the leading challenge for our facility. Inflation has made it increasingly difficult to maintain financial stability with the excessive cost of oil, food, and necessary facility supplies. The proposed funding for nursing homes doesn't recognize what is happening with inflation, and we are asking you to recognize the real inflation that we are experiencing in the budget.

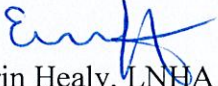
Bethel continues to experience the same staffing shortages we faced during the pandemic. We navigate the days and weeks to creatively fill schedule gaps due to vacant positions and other staffing issues. Even with a substantial volume of referrals, a unit at Bethel remains closed as we are unable to staff the additional beds. Despite robust efforts, we continually struggle to find quality staff and fill the necessary positions. We are forced to use agency nursing, which is far from ideal. Aside from the exorbitant costs, agency staffing does not provide the quality of care that we strive to deliver, rather it disturbs the continuity of care for our residents. Agency staff are not invested in the facility, and therefore we experience excessive call-outs, no-shows, and limited dependability. Such behaviors cause low staff morale, high turnover rates, and a decrease in the quality of care. We continue to pay unsustainable bonuses to our dedicated staff to pick up additional shifts and lessen the unavoidable negative impact associated with agency nursing. This too causes high burnout and negatively impacts the residents and the facility.

In an effort to mitigate these challenges, we focus heavily on recruitment and retention efforts both at a regional and facility level. Bethel sponsors C.N.A certificate programs and we provide onsite clinical rotations for multiple CNA, LPN and RN schools. We provide robust employee incentives, such as scholarship programs, sign on bonuses, referral bonuses, enhanced medical benefits and employer-funded retirement plans. In addition, Bethel Health Care and National Health Care have increased starting wages, and provide wage increases to staff every 6 months. These are unsustainable costs beyond what the state is paying in Medicaid Rates.

Our skilled nursing facility needs more resources to boost the pay of our dedicated employees, but the proposed budget doesn't address this issue. The resources the state legislature previously provided us to boost staff pay and benefits, has made a significant difference over the last two years, however, our employees are losing ground against inflation, just as we are. More funding is needed in the budget to address the unbelievable inflation we are facing and to help us with our soaring labor costs.

Thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to present this written testimony.

Sincerely,



Erin Healy, LNHA